OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK

REPORT

TO THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL

DATE: May 20, 2005   REPORT NO.: 05-04

SUBJECT: USE OF A MAIL BALLOT FOR THE SPECIAL ELECTION ON JULY 26, 2005

ISSUE

Shall the City of San Diego conduct the Special Election scheduled to be held on July 26, 2005 as an all mail ballot election?

BACKGROUND

The City of San Diego successfully completed an all mail ballot election in 1981. That election resulted in a voter turnout of 60% and costs of the election were 40% less than those of a conventional election. Although the all mail ballot has been suggested in the past for other elections, the city has not conducted any others since that time. The all mail ballot has, however, gained popularity in several cities in the state of California. In Oregon, the entire state has been voting by mail since 1998, when the voters passed a ballot measure directing that all elections be conducted by mail.   According to John Lindback, Director of Elections for the Oregon Secretary of State's Office, mail ballot elections in Oregon have consistently saved money and resulted in higher voter participation.

At the City Council meeting held on May 17, 2005, the City Clerk's Office was directed to research the possibility of conducting the special election scheduled for July 26, 2005, by an all mail ballot.

DISCUSSION

The Registrar of Voters has estimated that a conventional "go to the polls" election in the City of San Diego would cost nearly $3 million. Their estimate for an all mail ballot election, which is included in this report, indicates there would be substantial savings. These are largely the result of eliminating precinct operation costs. Those costs include such things as: poll worker recruitment, training and compensation; set up, equipment and supplies for over 700 polling places in the City; troubleshooters; and all other costs associated with polling places. These costs are a significant portion of the total costs for a conventional election.

A mail ballot election would be conducted in the same manner as absentee ballots are currently handled. The City of San Diego has approximately 600,000 registered voters. Of these, 110,000 are already permanent absentee voters. In an all mail ballot election, the other 490,000 would receive a mail ballot package as well. The package would include a voter information

pamphlet with instructions, an official ballot and a postage-paid return envelope. These would be mailed out beginning on the 29th day prior to Election Day, voted and mailed back to the Registrar's Office. Alternately, voters could return their ballots to an official drop-off location such as the City Clerk's Office or the Registrar of Voters. Voters would also be able to vote in person at the Office of the Registrar of Voters from 8 a.m.– 5 p.m., excluding weekends and holidays, from June 27th through election day. On July 26th, voters will be able to vote in person at the Registrar's Office from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. The Clerk's Office will work closely with the U.S. postal service and the Registrar of Voters to ensure that military personnel and voters, who have moved but remain in the City of San Diego, receive ballots in accordance with the law. As with all absentee ballots, the envelope containing the voted ballot would have to be signed by the voter. As a part of the processing at the Registrar's Office, the signature would then be verified against the voter registration database.

Following signature verification, and in accordance with state election law, the Registrar of Voters would begin processing returned ballots seven days prior to Election Day. Tabulation and release of initial results would occur shortly after 8 p.m. on Election Day. The number of ballots included in that initial count will be dependent on the volume and rate of ballots being returned in the weeks and days leading up to Election Day. Ballots received by the Registrar in the final days before July 26th will likely not be included in the initial posting of results. All ballots received by 8 p.m. Election Day, will be processed and included in subsequent "add-on" counts. It is anticipated that all the ballots would be counted within the week following Election Day. The results would be updated daily at a specified time in the days following Election Day. Although the official canvass of results must be completed within 28 days, the Registrar has indicated that, for this election, it could be completed within two weeks.

The Registrar has experience conducting all mail ballot elections for special districts and has provided the following rough estimate from them is based on 600,000 registered voters and a turnout of 50 percent.

Ballot Packets sent to 600,000+ Registered Voters

Ballots	-0-
Insertion/Mailing	$250,000
Postage (Outgoing)	$100,000
Envelopes (Outgoing)	$ 50,000
Envelopes (Incoming)	$ 50,000
Sample Ballot Booklet	$200,000
Translation Services	$ 20,000
Labor	$ 75,000
Subtotal	*$750,00*0

Incoming Ballots

300,000+ Voted Ballots Returned

Return Postage	$120,000
Signature Capture	$ 45,000
Sorting	$ 10,000
Labor	$550,000
Opening	
Scanning	
Signature Verification	

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          Tabulation
          Canvass
          Phone Bank/Call Center
          Misc.
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Subtotal                $725,000
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TOTAL   **$1,475,000**

Note: Ballots are being provided by the county's vendor at no charge for all elections conducted by the county at this time. There would be additional cost savings if voters paid their own return postage.

As you can see from this estimate, there would be a substantial savings over a conventional election. While outgoing mailing costs are fixed, the postage and processing costs for returned ballots vary based on the number of ballots returned. Postage and labor costs for processing ballots are only incurred for those that are returned. Based on this estimate, the City could save as much as $1-1.5 million by conducting the election by mail.

As a Charter City, San Diego was able to call a mail ballot election as early as 1981, although general law cities in the state are still limited in their use of the all mail ballot. Our discussions with the City Attorney's Office indicate that the election on July 26th could be conducted as an all mail ballot election by adoption of an ordinance with that direction to the Registrar of Voters. This will be presented to you at the Council Meeting on May 23, 2005. If adopted on May 23rd, the county will be able to conduct the special election on July 26th as an all mail ballot election.

SUMMARY

As the City Clerk, I pioneered the all-mail ballot in 1981 which gained nationwide attention. I was able to advise other municipalities as to the mechanics of the process as well as the cost savings. That election was a single ballot issue on the question of building a new Convention Center. Under my direction, a variety of agencies came together for the first time to conduct this unique and cost saving experience. This experience proved to be a model as a new methodology in the democratic process.

The City Clerk's Office recommends that the City Council call for an all mail ballot election on July 26th because of the substantial cost savings it would provide. We urge you to take this action at the Council meeting on May 24, 2005. I will be available to assist in any way I can.

Charles G. Abdelnour
City Clerk

cc: City Attorney
        City Manager
         Department Directors